

Remarks at a Prison Reform Summit and First Step Act Celebration

April 1, 2019

The President. Big day. Big day. [Applause] Thank you. Well, thank you very much. Please. Thank you. We are very honored to be joined by our incredible Vice President. Mike—please, stand up, Mike. Mike Pence.

Today we're here to celebrate the truly extraordinary bipartisan—that's a very pleasant word—[applause]—that's a pleasant word—achievement of the First Step Act. Very important. This landmark legislation will give countless current and former prisoners a second chance at life and a new opportunity to contribute to their communities, their States, and their nations. And that's what they're doing. Many distinguished—[applause]—that's true.

Many distinguished guests are here with us for today's—really, this is a ceremony that's something that's very special. And I want to just recognize a few of them: Attorney General William Barr. Thank you. A man doing a great job, Secretary Alex Acosta. Where is Alex? Ben Carson. Ben. HUD. Setting records over at HUD. Really good, Ben. I'm proud of you. Secretary Rick Perry, former Governor of Texas. And I have to say Rick really pioneered what we're here for today. He was an early advocate and has done a great job in a lot of ways, but as Governor of Texas also. An early pioneer of what we're doing today. Thank you, Rick.

And a very special thanks also to Members of Congress. We have with us Senators Chuck Grassley. Where is our Chuck? Chuck. Chuck. Thank you, Chuck. And I'm glad I found him. I'd be in trouble if I didn't find him. [Laughter] Bill Cassidy. Bill. Thank you, Bill. Senator Cassidy. Mike Lee. Mike? Thank you, Mike. Thank you. Senator Rob Portman. Thank you, Rob. Cindy Hyde-Smith. Ran a great race. Ran a great race. Good job. Congratulations, Cindy. Great job. And a friend of mine, Roger Wicker, Senator. Thank you.

And a lot of Congress men and women are here. But just to introduce a few of them: Congressman Doug Collins. Thank you. Thank you, Doug. Josh Gottheimer. Thank you, Josh. Thanks. And Tom Reed. No labels.

A lot of Governors are here, and some we're going to leave out—[laughter]—because I don't like them. But that's okay. I'll get to like them. Kentucky Governor—a man I do like—Matt Bevin.

An incredible guy, a friend of mine and all of us for a long time, and he's going to be leaving the Governorship one day soon, and we're not going to be happy about that at all: Phil Bryant. He's a fantastic Governor. He is a fantastic Governor. And he built the African American Museum, and it's one of the best jobs I've seen in a long time. A lot of money, but under budget and ahead of schedule, right, Phil? And he was proud of that. You don't see that often in government.

North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum. Doug? Thank you, Doug. And Mrs. Burgum. And Mrs. Burgum. Thank you very much. And Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton. Thanks, Ken. Washington, DC, Attorney General Karl Racine. Karl, thank you. Thank you, Karl. And Florida's former attorney general, Pam Bondi, respected by everybody. Where's Pam? Thank you, Pam.

And they're joined by many faith and law enforcement leaders. We have tremendous numbers of people here today that are just such strong believers in not only what we're doing, but also faith. And faith is a good thing. In my book, it's a great thing.

I also want to recognize someone that you all know well, who worked tirelessly on this project. And to achieve it he went through a lot. And I'll tell you what: He got there, and he got there with flying colors, because he believes, and a lot of other people believe—both conservative and liberal and those in the middle—Jared Kushner. Jared? *[Applause]*

And he did not want me to do that. Because I saw this beautiful line and—*[laughter]*—and he didn't want it, but other people did. They insisted that I do it, and it was real easy. But you know, Jared has had a very easy life. He was doing phenomenally in New York, and everything he touched has turned to gold. And then, one day, he said: "I want to come down, and I want to have peace in the Middle East. And I want to do criminal justice reform. And I want to do all these wonderful things." And his life became extremely complex. *[Laughter]*

And he wouldn't trade it. I don't think he'd trade it, because what he's doing is incredible. And he is doing great in the Middle East. I think you're going to have, someday—before we're finished, I think you're going to have something very important signed, and I hope so. You're doing a great job. Thank you.

So many people said—in fact, I guess we could say almost all people said—that criminal justice reform would never pass. But we came together as a group, we worked across party lines, and we got it done. And it's an incredible thing when you see some of the people here—so conservative and then some so liberal. *[Laughter]* And we just have a lot of great people that came together. They knew it had to be done.

As President, I pledged to work with both parties for the good of the whole Nation. And that's what it is: It's for the good of the whole Nation. And it's something that is so important to me in terms of this and lots of other things. And it's happening. Slowly, but surely, it's all happening.

The more I met and spoke with those involved in our criminal justice system, the more clear it became that unfair sentencing rules were contributing to the cycle of poverty and crime like really nothing else before. It was time to fix this broken system—and it's a system of the past—and to improve the lives of so many people.

And you look at the safety and all of the things that are happening now as a result of the First Step—as an example, nonviolent prisoners will have opportunities to participate in vocational training, education, and drug treatment programs. When they get out of prison, they will be ready to get a job instead of turning back to a life of crime. *[Applause]* Right?

And I'm really—I'm thrilled to report that, since I signed the First Step Act, more than 16,000 inmates have already enrolled in drug treatment programs. And my administration intends to fully fund and implement this historic law. It's happening, and it's happening fast. And it's a lot for some people to understand. As soon as they understand it, they say: "Wow. Why didn't we do this a long time ago?"

And some of the great Governors that are here with us today have already implemented it. And they were a step ahead and now they're going a step further. And I want to just congratulate them. And these are States that I won't name, because I don't know if I should be naming them, but these are States that you wouldn't think necessarily would be at the forefront of criminal justice reform. You understand that. Thank you.

The First Step Act serves as a model for criminal justice reform as the State level and all over the State level—all over every aspect of what we do—and throughout many States that are following our lead and already moving similar legislation forward—many of them are—including Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, and Mississippi.

The First Step Act also ensures that those in prison are placed closer to their families and home communities so they can have that communication that they need, greatly easing their return to society. It's really important. *[Applause]* That's really important. Right?

And finally, the law rolls back provisions of the 1994 Clinton crime law that was so devastating to some many and that disproportionately impacted the African American community. Nobody believes how much, and now they understand it.

In less than 4 months, more than 500 people with unfair sentences have been released from prison and are free to begin a new life. One of these newly freed Americans is Troy Powell, who is with us today. In 2004, Troy was sentenced to 20 years for doing a drug offense. During his 15 years in prison, he took courses and worked as an electrician, and he got really good at being an electrician. *[Laughter]* Really good. In fact, if you ever lose your job, come see me. I need electricians. *[Laughter]* We could use them right here in the White House, Troy, you want to know the truth. *[Laughter]*

In February, Troy was released under the First Step Act. Nine days later, he was hired at Boone Lumber Company in Lenoir, North Carolina. And now Troy is saving—and really saving a lot of money, because he's doing well. You know, our economy is helping a little bit, Troy. I'll tell you. *[Laughter]* But he's saving money to buy a home. And he's got one in mind. One particular home in mind. He'll get it, I have no doubt about it. So, Troy, congratulations. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Thank you, man. Do you want to say a couple words?

Lenoir, NC, resident Troy Powell. Yes, sure.

The President. He didn't know about it.

Mr. Powell. Oh, my God. Man, this is crazy. Well, first of all, I'd like to say thank you to everybody here on Capitol Hill for finally getting this bill pushed through. I mean, I know there was a lot of work involved in it. And I would like to say thank you to the organizations that got me here, like #cut50, and Amy, CAN-DO. And them people, I mean, they've done so much for me. It's unbelievable how much they've done for me. I never thought this bill would pass, and coming home and finding places like Boone Lumber Company that took a chance on me right out the door. I mean: "No problem. Come on to work." You know?

I can't thank everybody enough for that, and—but more than just thanking everybody for these things, there's more that can be done. I left so many people behind in prison doing 40 and 50 years for nothing. I mean, absolutely nothing. I mean, I—should I have went to prison? Absolutely. I committed a crime.

But for 20 years for the small things that I had done? I should have definitely went to prison. And I don't know what to say. I think there should be a second step, that's what I say. I think there should be a second step.

The President. Now, could I have said it better than that? *[Laughter]* His statement about so many people—and that's true. So many people in there that really are serving 40- and 50-year sentences for things that you wouldn't even believe; that some people wouldn't even be going to prison for today. So I want to—I just think that was incredible.

And don't worry, I'm going to ask a couple. And you know, none of them know they're going to speak, and that makes it—[*laughter*]*—*that usually produces a much better speech.

We're also proud to have with us on stage five more Americans who have been released under the First Step Act and transformed their lives, and that includes Gregory Allen. Where's Gregory? Gregory. Hi, Gregory. You want to say something?

Leesburg, FL, resident Gregory Allen. Yes.

The President. Come on.

Mr. Allen. Mine is real short. Two months ago, I was in a prison cell, and I'm in the White House. [*Laughter*] That's going to tell you to make America great again.

The President. That's great. [*Applause*] That's right. And you know what? The people of our country feel the same way as you do.

Mr. Allen. Absolutely.

The President. They do. They feel it.

Yvonne Fountain. Yvonne? Yvonne, thank you very much. Thank you very much, Yvonne. Oh, she wants to come up? Come up, Yvonne. She wants to come up. Come on, Yvonne.

Asheville, NC, resident Yvonne Fountain. Thank you so much. God bless you. Thank you. I just want to say I am so grateful. First, I want to thank God because God got me through a lot in prison. Yes, I went to prison. I did my time. I was good the whole time. I worked. I stayed out of trouble. I programmed. I did what I needed to do. When y'all passed this, I could've fell through the floor. [*Laughter*] Because I had to wait for years and years for them to pass that mandatory minimum. That's a hard thing.

But I'm grateful. I thank everybody who put their hands in it, all the hard work. And I really thank you for signing that bill. Because when you signed that bill, I could have went through the floor. Thank you so much.

The President. April Johnson. April. Come up, April.

Former prisoner April Johnson. I just want to thank you for signing the bill. I got compassionate release for my daughter. And because of that, I'll be able to spend what time she has left with her.

Mr. Allen. Take your time. Take your time.

April Johnson. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in September, and they have since gave her a grave prognosis. And because of the bill and the First Step Act, I'll be able to spend the rest of her time with her. And I thank you.

The President. Thank you, sweetheart. You take care. Say hello to your daughter, okay? Say hello to your daughter for me.

April Johnson. Thank you.

The President. Thank you very much. Beautiful.

Catherine Toney. Catherine? Catherine? Catherine—I thought that was you, Catherine. Come.

Mobile, AL, resident Catherine T. Toney. Good evening, everyone. First of all, I would like to thank God. Then I would like to thank the President for signing the bill. I also would like to

thank Jared. I would like to thank Van Jones, Jessica Jackson, #cut50, Amy Povah. I would also like to thank Harry Jackson, Bishop Harry Jackson. He's been great through my release. I would like to thank Jared for calling corporate of Walmart, giving me—getting me my first job in 16 years.

I would also like to thank Becky, which is here. Ms. Becky, could you please stand up? Becky Sadler. She has worked with me since I've left the White House the first time, getting me this job at Walmart with Jared—reached out to them. And I just want to thank everybody, both parties.

And what I have to say is I feel as if the First Step Act needs to be fully implemented, and it needs to be fully funded in order to make this step work. It's so many people that we left behind that needs the same opportunity that we on this stage have. And if they had the full funding that this step need, it would be many of us on this stage. So I just wanted to thank everyone. And God bless you all.

The President. And a man who's actually become much more famous than me, or anybody else in the room—[laughter]—his story is an incredible story, and it's been inspiring. And I'd just like to introduce quickly, Matthew Charles. Matthew. Come here, Matthew.

Nashville, TN, resident Matthew Charles. Thank you. I'm truly humbled. Nobody could be more faithful still. I'm truly humbled. I'm grateful. I'm thankful. Jared, the President, I'm thankful that you were insistent about getting this bill passed and signed. When it stalled in the Senate, and you informed Mitch McConnell you wanted to actually do this before that Senate or Congress went out, I'll always remember that. [Laughter] So I'm just humbled, thankful. In all, I'm still pleasantly overwhelmed, and it's an experience that I'll never forget. Thank you.

The President. And I want to thank you all. And a woman who I think is a terrific woman and spokesman, and I've watched her, and we helped her a little bit. She was in jail for a long time, and she had a long time to go. And I'd like to say—is Alice here? Where's Alice? Come up here, Alice, will you please? Alice Johnson. Alice Johnson. Come up.

Memphis, TN, resident Alice Marie Johnson. Thank you so much. First of all—everyone knows me—I have to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, first. And I want to thank our incredible President, President Donald John Trump. I just told him I finally get a chance to hug you and properly say thank you for believing in me. And I'd like to thank all of the advocates who have fought so long for me, who have been working behind the scenes trying to magnify my case.

I thank everyone in this room for your prayers. And I also want to thank the media for being so kind to me—[laughter]—because you have really helped magnify my story. [Laughter]

The President. Are you sure? [Laughter] That's good.

Alice Marie Johnson. But thank you. I'm an example of a woman who has been given a second chance in life. There are so many others who deserve that same second chance. And so I'm grateful for platforms like this, for events like this today, that magnifies that need, because somehow, when you see a face, when you see another human being like me who has been separated from their family almost 22 years, that changes things, that changes heart.

God bless you, and God bless America.

The President. Thank you. Thank you, Alice. You know, when you said—Alice said, "I want to also thank the media," I sort of bent over and said, "Are you sure?" [*Laughter*] She said—and I do too. I think it's fantastic. That's great.

And a couple of people: Van Jones, please stand up. Please. He goes after me on occasion—[*laughter*]—but you know what? He came together with this one. We all agree, this is very, very strong. This is a great bonding. And we appreciate it. You worked very hard on it, along with Ivanka. Please stand up. Ivanka. And, Charlie Kirk, stand up real fast. And, Matt Schlapp, stand up real fast. You guys—now, that's an example of seriously conservative people, and they're totally into it, right? I mean, so many. So many.

So, to recognize the dignity and the potential of every American, I have designated April as the "Second Chance Month." And we have a beautiful certificate coming.

As a result of our incredible economic turnaround—we had a big stock market day today, so that makes it even better, but a big day—there has never been a better time for those who need a second chance, and they get a fresh start.

It's so incredible to see people coming out of prison. They've done, historically, as you know, very, very poorly, oftentimes having to go back. Because they come out; they can't get a job. Nobody wants to hire them, because they were in prisons. And because the economy is so strong, they're getting an incredible start, as we say.

And it's also maybe even more incredible to see what the people that are doing the hiring are saying. They are in love with what's happening. They're hiring people that are great, and they're letting everyone know it. Everyone know it. Pretty incredible.

So the good economy is really giving them a chance—and a second chance and, in some cases, really a third chance. And they're working out. I can't say everybody, but the word is that it's been terrific. It's been just terrific. Employers all over the country are helping out. And Walmart has been a big factor. Ivanka, I know that was through you. And other of the major companies, but also smaller companies. And they are: The results are incredible. They're just really good. And we're very, very happy about that. So congratulations to everybody in the room.

Since my election, we've created more than 5.3 million jobs. Unemployment has reached the lowest rate in more than 50 years. Last year, a record 73 percent of new jobs went to people who were out of the labor force—totally out, totally out—and now they're coming off the sidelines and going back to work.

And you've seen where I've said a lot, because I'm very proud of it. And I said, "What do you have to lose?" And people would say, "Well, maybe you shouldn't say it." But I meant that, because it was tough. African American unemployment is the lowest level in the history of our country right now. And that goes for Hispanic American, Asian American. Women are very close. Women are at a 64-year low. It's up to 64. Soon to be historic, I hope. And it's been incredible.

African American income, by the way, and Hispanic American income is the highest level it's ever been in the history of our country. That's a big factor too.

But to take advantage of everything, those with criminal records still face many barriers toward gainful employment. When Catherine Toney was released in February, she had difficulty finding work due to her past record. She applied to the local Walmart in Daphne, Alabama. As part of our pledge to America's workers, Walmart is looking to change its hiring

practice; it has already started very strongly and is hiring a lot of great people. And some are getting a second chance, and some are getting a little bit more than that. And I want to thank Walmart.

And I really want to thank some of the big companies of our country. They're doing an incredible job. What they're doing is—I think, even if you go back, Van, 5 years, 10 years, you go back just a short while ago, nobody would believe what's happening with respect to exactly what we're talking about today. Very few people would believe it. So we're very, very proud.

They interviewed Catherine. They were really impressed by her resolve, her ability to speak so beautifully. She'll probably end up running for office. *[Laughter]* And 2 weeks ago, she began her first day on the job. And I have no doubt she's going to be very successful, and she'll do a terrific job.

So, Catherine, we can't wait to see you and all that you achieve over what will be a long, long life. And we appreciate it very much. We really appreciate it very much. Fantastic. We look forward to that.

Americans with criminal records are unemployed at rates up to five times higher than the national average. Today I am announcing that the Second Step Act will be focused on successful reentry and reduce unemployment for Americans with past criminal records. And that's what we starting right away.

And I'm very proud to say that we're leading the way, but a lot of States are now following us. They're liking it; they're following us. And believe it or not, it's great for our people, it's great for the people that it so deeply affects. But you know, it's also great for the economy. We actually—it's hard to believe, we save a tremendous amount of money, because people are coming out with these 40- and 50-year sentences for what you would consider to be—everything's serious, but not that serious. And they're getting out, and they're working instead of being in prison. And we're saving hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars and doing good at the same time. So that's sort of a rare occurrence.

Our goal is to cut the rate to single digits within 5 years. And I think that's very, very achievable, especially if the economy keeps going the way it is. And we're going to keep it going the way it is.

When we say "hire American," we mean all Americans, including former inmates who have paid their debt to society. And they've paid it, in many cases, more than many of the people that we think of in our society. They have really paid their debt. Our bond with our fellow citizens is what stitches us together as one united Nation, sharing one common destiny.

We will achieve our goal by encouraging employers to adopt "second chance" hiring practices. That's a movement that's very, very en vogue. But, when I say "en vogue," it's something that's happening, and it's happening all over. And again, we're going to lead that way, but we are really being studied by a lot of great Governors in a lot of States. And some are even with us. I don't want to let them get too far ahead of us, because I would hate to have that down. *[Laughter]* We came in second; that's no good. But they really are. They're doing a fantastic job at the State level.

We're also making it easier to work by removing obstacles to securing housing and driver's licenses and occupational licenses. And we're promoting mentorship through proven programs such as Prison Fellowship, something that people really find very important and very good. *[Applause]* Right?

My administration is also supporting funding for reentry programs, including \$88 million for Second Chance Act. You know that. And an estimated \$28 million for the Pell Grants pilot program. Great, great program. And really, I think maybe more than anything else, we're now proving that we are a Nation that believes in redemption.

And to remind us what is possible, we are joined by a couple of people. First of all, is Pastor Scott here? Darrell Scott. Where's the pastor? Is he here someplace? He's worked so hard. I wanted to point him out. Darrell, thank you very much. Thank you, Darrell. Darrell Scott. Thank you. Worked so hard. Every time I see him on television, I say, "I don't want to go against that guy." [Laughter] He's a tough pastor and a good friend.

And also a man who has served time in Federal prison, but today he's with us, and he's now a professor of law at a place called Georgetown University, and one of his students happens to be my daughter Tiffany—so, Shon—hey, could I ask Shon to come up, please? Where is Shon? Are you here? Where is Shon? Shon, come up.

Is my daughter okay as a student?

Georgetown University Associate Professor of Law Shon R. Hopwood. She is.

The President. She'd better be. [Laughter]

Mr. Hopwood. It's fun to get to come back here. The one thing I realized when we worked on First Step was, I got to meet a lot of really cool people. And we worked on this together, and I have become friends with so many of you.

It's astonishing to me that so many people want to come work and help people that are in prison. Because when you're in prison, it feels very lonely, and there's not a lot of hope. And now there is more hope in the Federal system than there ever has been at any point since I have been watching. And that's because of the work that everybody in this room has done.

Thank you for helping people like me. Thank you for giving second chances. I think you are going to be rewarded in a way that you cannot even imagine when we get more people like my friend, Matthew Charles—who, by the way, came over to our house last night for dinner. And you know what my daughter said?

The President. What?

Mr. Hopwood. My 7-year-old daughter said: "Dad, how do I talk to Matthew? He's so famous." [Laughter]

So thank you, Mr. President, for your leadership on this. You have gotten things done that has taken decades of work from a lot of people in this room. And to see the fruits of your labor is just amazing to watch. Thank you, sir.

The President. Thank you very much. Keep up the good work.

And the First Step Act proves that, really, beyond almost anything we can think of, our country can achieve amazing breakthroughs when we put politics aside and put the interests of all Americans first. It's true. It's so true. Especially in these times.

If we work together for the common good, we can forge a future of even greater safety, opportunity, dignity, and freedom for the families across this incredible Nation of ours.

I want to again thank everybody in the room, everybody for being with us. So many leaders. I see Paula White; she's worked so hard on bringing the faith-based community

together. And where's Paula? That's great. So hard. I want to thank you. I want to thank you. Such a great job.

And most importantly, I want to congratulate all of the people that have been so incredibly successful. They've left a place called prison, and as you said brilliantly, they arrived at the White House. They go from prison to the White House. And you know what? You're going to have an incredible future. Everybody in this room—you know who we're talking about—and the people standing on this stage, you're going to have an incredible future.

And it's my honor and it's the honor of all of the folks in this room that have helped to have been part of a process, I think, that's going to go down as a tremendous day in the history of our country. A lot of tremendous things are about to happen. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:01 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to White House Senior Adviser Jared C. Kushner; Van Jones, president and cofounder, #cut50; Adviser to the President Ivanka M. Trump; Charlie Kirk, founder and executive director, Turning Point USA; Matthew A. Schlapp, chairman, American Conservative Union; Darrell C. Scott, senior pastor and cofounder, New Spirit Revival Center; and Paula White-Cain, senior pastor, New Destiny Christian Center in Apopka, FL. He also referred to Proclamation 9857. Mr. Powell referred to Amy Povah, founder, CAN-DO Clemency. Ms. Toney referred to Jessica Jackson, national director and cofounder, #cut50; and Harry R. Jackson, Jr., pastor, Hope Christian Church in Beltsville, MD.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Prison reform summit and First Step Act celebration.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Acosta, R. Alexander ; Allen, Gregory; Barr, William P.; Bevin, Matthew G.; Bondi, Pamela J.; Bryant, D. Philip; Burgum, Douglas J.; Burgum, Kathryn; Carson, Benjamin S., Sr.; Cassidy, William M.; Charles, Matthew; Clinton, William J.; Collins, Douglas A.; Fountain, Yvonne; Gottheimer, Josh; Grassley, Charles E.; Hopwood, Shon R.; Hyde-Smith, Cindy; Johnson, Alice Marie; Johnson, April; Jones, Van; Kirk, Charlie; Kushner, Jared C.; Lee, Michael S.; Paxton, W. Kenneth, Jr.; Pence, Michael R.; Perry, J. Richard; Portman, Robert J.; Powell, Troy; Racine, Karl A.; Reed, Thomas W.; Schlapp, Matthew A.; Scott, Darrell C.; Toney, Catherine T.; Trump, Ivanka M.; Trump, Tiffany A.; White-Cain, Paula; Wicker, Roger F.

Subjects: Economy, national : Improvement; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment rate; Energy, Department of : Secretary; Holidays and special observances : Second Chance Month; Housing and Urban Development, Department of : Secretary; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Kentucky : Governor; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Law enforcement and crime : Criminal justice system, reform efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Pardons and commutations; Law enforcement and crime : Parole and ex-convict reintegration programs, improvement efforts; Middle East : Arab-Israeli conflict, peace process; Mississippi : Governor; North Dakota : Governor; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Adviser to the President; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Senior Adviser; White House Office : Vice President.

DCPD Number: DCPD201900200.